

Chapter Five

‘I curse your preoccupation with your record collection’: The Fall on Vinyl 1978–83

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The New Puritan

The moment occurs towards the end of ‘New Puritan’, one of the tracks off the *Totale’s Turns* LP that was recorded in ‘other places’; this time ‘at home during which said home was attacked by a drunk, which accounts for the tension on that track’ (Smith 1980). The narrative is all over the place. Mark E. Smith first hails the new puritan, and then he becomes him: ‘All hard-core fiends/Will die by me’, he declares, ‘And all decadent sins/Will reap discipline.’ The lyrics then go on to describe LA, where the ‘window opener switch/Is like a dinosaur cackle’; they next turn to Britain, finding ‘the scream of electric pumps in a renovated pub’. Then we are back with first person declarations. Smith cries out, ‘Don’t call me Peter I can’t go/Salem’s just up the road/I’ve got work to do.’ Finally, after we have been asked to hail the new puritan a few more times, we get this:

I curse your preoccupation
With your record collection
New puritan has no time
It’s only music, John
(The Fall, ‘New Puritan’)

It is preoccupations, record collections and curses that I wish to discuss here; primarily, the collection of records that The Fall released between 1978 and 1983, the first six years of their recorded existence. In the following I will outline the ways in which this output exposed and undermined previous record collecting practice. I also discuss one of the perverse ways in which this ambition was achieved: The Fall’s early releases display a lyrical preoccupation with recordings. The objects that will be under discussion are vinyl records. It is important to note that prior to 1983 The Fall’s music was released solely in this format.¹ In the following I wish to outline just how central the vinyl record was as both subject and context of the band’s original work.

¹ The first official Fall release to come out in more than one format was 1983’s *Perverved By Language*, which was issued on both LP and cassette.

The Preoccupation

It is the grooved analogue disc that has preoccupied record collectors. As early as 1970 the jazz critic Derek Langridge was commenting that ‘Collectors find an attraction in discs that they do not find in tapes’ (1970, 10). More recently, Ian Shirley, editor of the *Rare Record Price Guide*, has conceded that CDs are ‘just not as sexy as vinyl. They lack that allure’ (quoted in Jones 2006). This has been reflected in financial terms. In 2004 the *Record Collector* magazine celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary by compiling a top 100 of the UK’s most collectable records. Out of this top 100, ninety-seven were released on either vinyl or shellac discs (‘100 Rarest Records’ 2004). Mark E. Smith is among those who favour vinyl. In *Renegade* he writes that the format is ‘very underrated’, adding ‘I still think in terms of vinyl – sides one and two’ (Smith 2008a, 197, 151).

To uncover the roots of vinyl’s allure, we must turn back to the music industry’s first format war. In the first decade of the twentieth century the phonograph cylinder invented by Thomas Edison in 1877 yielded its position as the leading recording format to the gramophone disc, patented by Emile Berliner a decade later. This victory was by no means a foregone conclusion. It is generally agreed that the cylinder afforded the superior method of sound reproduction. It also, unlike the disc, provided a home-recording function for the amateur enthusiast. The disc, meanwhile, was only able to offer pre-recorded material. Initially, its principal selling points were that it was easier to duplicate than the cylinder, that it was louder, that it was more robust and that it could be stored more conveniently.

Nevertheless, the factor that proved to be truly decisive was repertoire. And what is curious here is that what could be perceived as the disc’s weakness – that there was no home-recording ability – turned out to be an advantage. First, it meant that gramophone companies, from the beginning, focused on professional recordings. This assumed importance when it was discovered that the public had little appetite for listening to recordings of themselves: because it had never been ‘tainted by amateur offerings’ (Barfe 2004, 26) the disc could promote itself as a luxury good. To this end, gramophone companies pursued a policy of signing the world’s most renowned artists to exclusive contracts. At first they targeted the operatic stars of Europe, with the signing of Enrico Caruso in 1902 representing the significant breakthrough; later, when the recording of orchestras improved, they also signed conductors and soloists. Parallel to this process, the gramophone, which had originally been viewed as a technical machine, was now being marketed as a domestically acceptable piece of furniture, as indicated by the names given to new models: ‘Sheraton’, ‘Chippendale’, ‘Queen Anne’. These policies established the gramophone as a must-have commodity.

The exclusivity of analogue discs has been essential in establishing their special status. Uniquely among sound recording media there has never been a successful method by which you can record your own shellac or vinyl discs at home. Two further quirks of the disc-manufacturing process also helped to bring forth the record collector. The first of these is the ‘record label’, the paper insert in the middle

of the disc, which acquired such importance that it soon became synonymous with record companies themselves. This was another development that only arose as a result of the restrictive nature of analogue disc manufacture. As a disc's groove winds ever tighter towards its centre, sound quality decreases (unlike the groove of a cylinder, which maintains uniform sound quality throughout). Eventually, it reaches a point beyond which it cannot acceptably reproduce audio information. This leaves a void at the centre of the disc. A use was immediately found for it: information relating to the recording could be detailed here. At first these details were etched directly into the record's surface. Then, in the early years of the twentieth century, the paper label was introduced. This innovation not only dignified the factory-produced disc, it also allowed records to be colour-coded by genre, with the most revered label being the 'red seal' of classical recordings. Soon records were being collected for their status as objects, as well as for the music that they contained. The recording historian Louis Barfe has pointed out that 'Later collectors noted the preponderance of mint single-sided Red Seals and were led to conclude that they were rarely if ever played' (2004, 66).

The other quirk that helped to bring forth the record collector is the fact that, although analogue records are mass produced, each disc can be differentiated. On the one hand, records degrade in accordance with usage: the groove captures dust if it is exposed, and it wears in relation to the number of times that it is played. On the other hand, records are produced in separate and distinguishable batches. Combined, these factors have led to the fetishization of the mint, first pressing of the disc. The vinyl long-playing record, introduced by Columbia in 1948, elevated the disc to even greater heights. Although vinyl was more robust than the shellac that it replaced, the LP's delicate microgroove attracted dust more easily. In addition, its finer recording quality meant that any glitches in reproduction were more easily noted. It was also an expensive product. The first British LPs were introduced in 1952, with prices ranging from 22s. to 39s. At this time the average weekly wage for men over 21 was £8.30 per week (see Marwick 1982, 114). Elaborate rituals evolved for taking care of these precious discs: specific ways of holding, cleaning and storing them. Packaging played a part in establishing the LP's exalted status: these records were the first to regularly receive picture sleeves, inner sleeves and sleeve notes. There was also the matter of repertoire. The LP was developed principally for classical music, the genre that made up the bulk of early releases. It was established as a grown-up and sophisticated product. It was aided in this process by virtue of the fact that it soon had an opposite: in 1949 RCA Victor launched the 45rpm, 7" vinyl record, which was quickly cast as the vehicle for more commercial forms of popular music.

Mark E. Smith is surely not alone in his troubled experience of trying to play 45s on his family's hi-fi system:

We never really had records in our home when I was young. We had a record player but, if we did play a record, my dad would say 'You are breakin' the fuckin' record player. Take that off!' It would just be some rock 'n' roll record ...

Elvis Presley or something, but my dad would never have it. 'You think you are being funny, playin' that, don't you? Take it off. Take it off, now. It's breaking all the equipment.' (Middles and Smith 2003, 35)

The reverence for elite, professional, and expensive vinyl records evidently niggled Mark E. Smith. There is an early live version of the song 'Music Scene' in which he breaks off from the usual lyrics, informing the crowd:

When you go to the record shop you don't get in for free. In fact, you get about five pound; you put five pound on the counter: you get about half an hour. Ha-ha! Half an hour for five pound! Seven-inch, 80 pence. Eighty pence for about five minutes. But the sleeves are very nice, yes, the sleeves are very nice. (quoted in Edge 1989, 13)

The John Peel session version of 'New Puritan' takes matters further. Here, Mark E. Smith asks: 'Why don't you ask your local record dealer how many bribes he took today?' This rendition has the amended lyrics:

I curse the self-copulation
Of your lousy record collection
New puritan says 'Coffee table LPs never breathe.'
(The Fall, 'New Puritan' *John Peel Sessions*)

The Fall thereby put a hex on the antiseptic elitism of the recorded music scene and they did this by making records that sound as though they might 'break all the equipment'.

The Curse

During the late 1960s, popular music split into two camps: 'rock' which was supposedly serious, artistic and anti-establishment and 'pop' which was derided by rock aficionados as being commercial, disposable and crass. One of the ways in which this fracture occurred was along format lines. Rock music colonized the LP, absorbing the format's classicism, its high-quality musicianship and hi-fidelity recording techniques, as well as the artistry of its sleeves. Pop, meanwhile, continued to be associated with the 45rpm single and its generic-label bags.

By 1978, when The Fall commenced their recorded music career, the LP was the established receptacle for portentous statements by rock's leading players. Groups such as Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd refused to release 7" singles; the idea being that each album release should remain sacrosanct. These long playing statements were to be anticipated, pored over and revered. It was amid this rarefied world that The Fall's curse was most effective: they did not make coffee table LPs. The Fall's albums of their first six years effectively undermined notions of what

an LP should be. They are records that consistently mock recording perfectionism and musical professionalism.

The first LP, *Live at the Witch Trials*, was proudly recorded in just one day. One of the songs, 'Mother-Sister!', opens with the profound question: 'Er, what's this song about?', receiving the reply, 'Er, nothing.' 'Music Scene', the lengthy track that concludes the LP, is conscious of the fact that it is heading towards progressive territory. Consequently, it is broken with cries of 'OK, studio, that's plenty', as well as featuring time-checks detailing how far the recording has moved on. It is also interrupted with lo-fi home tape recordings. Mark E. Smith readily endorsed the tape cassette, which rose to prominence during this era. This format represented a return to the days of the phonograph cylinder: once again amateurs could record themselves. The cassette recording provided the perfect means with which The Fall could puncture vinyl's professionalism; it has gate-crashed numerous tracks during the band's lengthy career.

Dragnet, The Fall's second album, was completed in three days, with the then novice Grant Showbiz at the controls. Smith has stated: 'It panned out okay, though, and looking back it wasn't such a bad thing using an inexperienced producer.' He adds:

Most of it is purposefully out of tune. But later we found out that Cargo Studios in Rochdale [where the album was recorded] didn't want to let it out. It was a heavy metal studio and they were nervous about releasing it because of its sound. They thought it'd reflect badly on them. (Smith 2008a, 80)

More than any other Fall album, *Dragnet* is obsessed with the group's presence within and difference from the established world of professional recording. Many of the lyrics almost sound like catchy hooks but then they back away. For instance there is 'Choc-Stock', with its hilarious 'breakdown' section. Some of the songs too are almost sophisticated. But then the production breaks through. Just as we're enjoying the atmosphere of 'A Figure Walks', a ridiculously loud crashing cymbal breaks it.² The playful 'Choc-Stock' is followed by the astonishing and agonizing 'Spectre vs. Rector'. The majority of this latter piece was recorded on a cheap cassette player. Smith delivered the results to Grant Showbiz, informing him, 'that's the track'.³

Totale's Turns, the next album, is of even lower sound quality, being made up of various abandoned cassette tape recordings: 'They were lying around in a studio somewhere' (Smith 2008a, 85). It was released by Rough Trade, who regarded it

² Speaking at the 'Messing up the Paintwork' conference, Grant Showbiz revealed the reasons for the volume levels on this track. The cymbal player was Mark E. Smith and the reason why the instrument could not be mixed any lower is because he was playing it at the same time as he recorded his vocal; the volume of the cymbal is the volume at which it bled into the vocal microphone.

³ Recalled by Grant Showbiz at the 'Messing up the Paintwork' conference.

as ‘one of the worst quality recordings ever committed to vinyl’ (Thompson 2003, 45). According to Smith: ‘In the band’s eyes it was commercial suicide releasing this dirge; they couldn’t see the soul that lay behind it. That’s musicians for you’ (Smith 2008a, 85).

This LP was followed by *Grotesque*, which apparently cost only £300 to produce, this sum including the band’s first full-colour sleeve. The album contains the unique lo-fi excursion, ‘W.M.C.-Blob 59’, about which the group claimed: ‘This is a very funny track. It’s a pity you can’t hear what’s going on’ (press release for *Grotesque*, quoted in Ford 2003, 87). An established jazz sleeve-note convention had been to list the quality equipment used in the making of an LP. This was parodied by The Fall. A press release detailed the components of this track:

1 x Shure microphone (B-roke);

1 x ‘Schitti’ 15w amp;

1 x 1964 Red ‘New Beat’ plastic guitar;

1 x model no. 90000 AC Lewis’s tape recorder with special ‘Hopeless’ black-grey mike. (quoted in Ford 2003, 87)

These weren’t the only Fall instruments to break with convention. The first album is characterized by Una Baines’ ‘Snoopy’ keyboard (played by Yvonne Pawlett), the cheapest device on the market and reviewed by *Melody Maker* as the worst you could buy. From *Dragnet* onwards the band made frequent use of the kazoo; a working-class riposte to the horn sections then in vogue.

The Fall were also fond of choosing unusual locations for their recordings: a damp warehouse for ‘Spectre vs. Rector’, the home recording of ‘New Puritan’, Iceland and a cinema in Hitchin for *Hex Enduction Hour*. Their statements about their LPs were equally unconventional. Whereas the rock elite promoted their albums as the latest instalment of their developing art, The Fall’s records, sleeve notes and press releases are littered with self-abuse: ‘I don’t sing, I just shout’ (from ‘Your Heart Out’), ‘the mistakes are glorious’ (from the press release for ‘In My Area’), ‘white crap let loose in a studio but still in control’ (from the notes for *Dragnet*), ‘Call yourselves bloody professionals?’ (from the sleeve notes for *Totale’s Turns*).

And then there are the sleeves. It was in the retail environment that The Fall displayed their difference most brilliantly. Not for this group the elaborate Hipgnosis packaging that surrounded Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin LPs; nor did they lean towards the sophisticated graphic design that their contemporaries on Factory and Fast Records were displaying. Instead, The Fall’s early records are housed in sleeves that feature scrappy cartoons, blurred and badly cropped photographs of the group, or grainy pictures of Prestwich. In addition, most of the sleeves feature the unique Smith scrawl. This ranges from the simple declarations of the Northern towns in which the band performed the *Totale’s Turns* live recordings, of which

Mark E. Smith has claimed: ‘Nobody wanted to release it, because nobody played the sort of venues that you hear on it – places like Doncaster and Preston. It wasn’t the done thing to promote ourselves like that’ (Smith 2008a, 84), to the graffiti splurge of *Hex Enduction Hour*, which so horrified the HMV retail chain that they informed staff to display the sleeve backwards (see Edge 1989, 49).

The Record Collection

The Fall’s wilful abuse of their recorded status went some way towards making the curse of ‘New Puritan’ effective. The record collector’s preoccupation with the material object and with the technical specifics of recording, rather than with music itself, was exposed and undermined. What interests me here, however, is the identity of ‘John’, the everyman record collector who is being cursed in the song. Is he the rock record buyer? Is he the purchaser of the *Totale’s Turns* LP? Or could he, perhaps, be Mark E. Smith himself? Most intriguing is the latter idea. The shifting narrative of ‘New Puritan’ means that it is never clear whether it is the new puritan/Smith who delivers the curse, or whether it is the new puritan/Smith who receives it. Moreover, it is a curse from which the speaker cannot escape; as it is made he reveals his preoccupation with the preoccupation with records.

There is ample evidence that Mark E. Smith has been obsessed with recordings. His appetite is revealed in the live version of ‘C’n’C-S Mithering’, during which he announces, ‘I’ll feast on 45s.’ On the occasion of The Fall’s twenty-fifth anniversary he stated:

I regard the twenty-fifth year as 25 years after our first record, not 25 years since we got together in some bedroom, somewhere. Who cares about that? (Middles and Smith 2003, 141)

Mark E. Smith has always used his records to talk about his records. In The Fall’s early output cross-references abound: ‘Container Drivers’ name-checks ‘Fiery Jack’; the protagonist of ‘I’m into C.B.’ says ‘I should have listened to “New Face in Hell”’; the *Totale’s Turns* version of ‘Spectre vs. Rector’ recalls the earlier version on *Dragnet*, informing the listener that ‘This is the second half of spectre versus rector/The rector lived in Hampshire/You probably know this if you’ve got the record.’ Elsewhere, Mark E. Smith uses the Peel session versions of songs to tell listeners about the recorded versions. During ‘No Xmas for John Quays’ he states ‘Make sure this album is in your Christmas stocking’; as part of ‘New Face in Hell’ we are informed, ‘This is off the new LP.’

This record referencing isn’t limited to the releases by his own band: we also discover the other artists that Mark E. Smith has been checking out. The lyrics of The Fall’s early records find room for Bjorn and Benny, the Worst, Frankie Lymon, Jake Burns, Joe Strummer, Faust, Johnny Rotten, Bill Haley, the Beat, Wah! Heat, Captain Beefheart, the Ramones, Elton John, Megas Jonsson, D. Bowie,

the Moody Blues, Kevin Ayers, Link Wray, the B.E.F., Louis Armstrong, Shakin' Stevens and King Crimson. By virtue of the fact that their music had appeared on vinyl, The Fall had been promoted to this league of recorded sound. The fact that the group's releases would be racked alongside Abba and Shakin' Stevens evidently both thrilled and appalled Mark E. Smith. These new professional peers are commented upon and absorbed. Early Fall records betray some surprising influences: 'Rowche Rumble' owes an admitted debt to Racey's 'Some Girls'; Trio's 'Da Da Da' can be glimpsed in the intro to 'Fortress'; the imprint of 'Ring of Fire' is all over 'Fiery Jack'; 'Hassle Schmuck' is inspired by Coast to Coast's 'Do the Hucklebuck'.

Meanwhile, in the group's lyrics, Mark E. Smith examines his place at the music industry table. His talk is full of the likes of 'Big A&M Herb' (in 'C'n'C - S Mithering) and 'fucking Jimmy Saville' (in 'Fortress'). At the beginning of 'The N.W.R.A.' he imagines the situation whereby:

'Junior Choice' played one morning. The song was 'English Scheme.' Mine. They'd changed it with a grand piano and turned it into a love song. How they did it I don't know.

In the BBC Fall documentary, Paul Morley argues that The Fall's music 'fitted into the John Peel show because it was, in a way, made out of the John Peel show' (*The Fall: The Wonderful and Frightening World of Mark E. Smith*, 2005). Smith's ambitions were, nevertheless, greater than that. In *Renegade* he states mournfully:

The idea was that you did John Peel, then progressed on to the 7 till 9 slot and so on. We never went that far from Peel, and ultimately that was a limitation for us. You become known as a 'Peel group'. (Smith 2008a, 102)

'Junior Choice' may have been stretching things a little far but it is clear that Mark E. Smith always contextualized his records among more mainstream releases. It is telling that he can still recall each LP's contemporaries: Aztec Camera, Scritti Politti and Duran Duran for *Slates*; Spandau Ballet and Elvis Costello for *Hex Enduction Hour*; Echo and the Bunnymen for *Perverved By Language*. The fact that he derides these bands' audiences reveals the ambiguity of his position. Futurists are berated on *Hex Enduction Hour*; new romantics on *Room to Live*; 'the 77 shit pile' during 'In My Area' on *Totale's Turns*.

Call Yourselves Bloody Professionals?

One of the factors that makes The Fall's early output continually fascinating is Mark E. Smith's mixture of arrogance and insecurity. The dual perspective of 'New Puritan' exposing his own obsession with record collections at the same time that he criticizes that of others is one example of this tendency. The same

holds true for The Fall's attack upon 'coffee table LPs'. The Fall's scrappy records undermined the seriousness that had been accorded to contemporary rock albums but in doing so they ran the danger of undermining their own status as vinyl records. Nevertheless this is not what happened. What makes the curse in 'New Puritan' resonate is the fact that it is contained on a record, one that will be ranked alongside and collated amid the owner's previous collection. From the beginning The Fall attracted a particularly obsessive following. Mark E. Smith was surely aware that one of the ways that this obsession would manifest itself would be in the practice of collecting the band's releases. The curse comes across as a knowing acknowledgement of this fact.

However, what he presumably could not have predicted was just how collectable the band's output would be. The Fall's early singles and LPs formed part of the late 1970s boom in cheaply packaged and produced independent records. The great irony of these releases is that, far from being regarded as inferior to their more polished peers, they were often more highly valued. The romantic 'handmade' nature of the records accounts for some of their appeal. This was as effective in distinguishing these discs from the mass-produced herd as the 'red seal' record label had been three-quarters of a century earlier. The fact that many of these releases were manufactured in low numbers also helped to make them collectors' items. This was one of the eras in which record collecting took a great leap forward. In 1977 the *New Musical Express* commented, 'some customers are buying everything from the independent labels ... They realise the investment might pay off' (Bell 1977, 26). In relation to The Fall, it has been the independent records of their early years that have proven to be the most collectable: these are the recordings that are most highly valued in the *Rare Record Price Guide*.⁴

And would Mark E. Smith still curse his fans for collecting the records of these first six years? I don't think so. Several years later, appearing in another of his guises, this time as the 'Big New Prinz', he would turn another song's narrative towards himself.⁵ This song has the self-referential complaint, 'he is not appreciated'. For evidence, Mark E. Smith urges the listener to go out and 'check the track record. Check the guy's track record.'

⁴ In the 2008 edition (Shirley 2006) original vinyl copies of the early albums are valued as follows: *Live at the Witch Trials*, £12; *Dragnet*, £15; *Totale's Turns*, £15; *Grotesque*, £14; *Slates*, £10; *Hex Enduction Hour*, £12; and *Perverved By Language*, £15.

⁵ Here we have a character-driven Fall song that refers to and quotes from another character-driven Fall song, 'Hip Priest'. 'Big New Prinz' is written in the third-person and it extols the virtues of the 'Hip Priest'. As for the identity of the 'Hip Priest', this is another song in which the narrative fluctuates: Smith sings of the Hip Priest, and he sings as the Hip Priest. As so often with his song's characters doubt remains as to the degree of self-portrayal. Nevertheless, in live performances of recent years the main refrain of 'Big New Prinz' has taken on a more concrete meaning. The audience knows that Smith is the Hip Priest and, although adored by his loyal following, this latent national institution accepts the call-and-response refrain that it is 'he' who 'is not appreciated'.

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